ILLUSION: 1915

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H. M. TOMLINSON

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Anno Domini

MDCCCCXXVIII

Christmas again, and for the 1928th time the busy world pauses, conscious of the day's implications. This little volume, the first edition of this strangely moving tale by H. M. Tomlinson, has been issued by Messrs Harper & Brothers for presentation to their friends at this Holiday Season.

ILLUSION:

1915

By H. M. Tomlinson

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THE French house I sought was seen, as I turned a corner, remote in a diminishing avenue of noble trees. Below the hush of midsummer was the vibration of many wings. The bees were in the limes. I could smell the nectar of that tree; it is full summer when the limes are flowering and the bees get drunk. I found that a pleasant confirmation of the season, for to me that summer was hardly authentic. The house was set deeply in a long perspective of foliage, as though I stood in the June of one year and saw distantly the pale ghost of the old chateau in a silent June of the past. I wanted to reach that house, but it looked as though I could get no nearer to it than the murmuring summer in which I stood. I could only look back to where it was secluded in the silence of a forgotten year.

A confusing idea, but then it was a confusing summer—a summer doubtful with its aspect of immemorial continuity, yet suggesting bleakly a subtle yet disastrous interruption in the life of the earth, as though everything appeared to be the same, but we were being cheated with only the bright illusion of familiar things. What had been always behind them had gone. It was June, 1915. If in one of the arbors about me, where stood white statues pensive with ancient secrets they would never disclose, I had surprised a furbelowed lady who ought to have been living only in a picture by Watteau, she might have been more startled than myself. I should have felt that I was the intruder, and should have withdrawn at once from a June which did not belong to me. Not my June. Not a lady for me, but only for a gentleman in satin breeches and a brocaded coat. And from one of those arbors, in a scene which was still and haunted, a figure did suddenly emerge. It came out briskly, gave me a direct but not a startled look, and turned towards the chateau. It had a cockney face, and its khaki dress was unrelieved by any or-

nament except the blue-and-white armlet of a British signaler. It seemed to have no doubt about its year.

So I judged that, after all, I might not be lost in another age. Anyhow, others were lost there with me; or perhaps in a celestial dreaminess the gods had become careless and had muddled the sunlights and affairs of far different times. For a Sikh, with a rifle which was only a toy in his giant's grasp—a giant in a black beard—was patrolling the balustrade of that French house above a moat in which waterlilies floated. The Indian sentry reached the limit of his beat and paused to regard the figure of Aphrodite, who stood below him with a foot coyly poised over the water she had been about to enter since Louis Soleil was king. War? Not even though a bearded Sikh was contemplating Aphrodite. There was no war. There was but an occasional and inexplicable flutter of the air. The air sometimes shook; the summer day was quite peaceful, but it was not accurately fitted to the earth, it was not quite firm on its base. There was a sense of insecurity in it, as though it might be withdrawn from

us because it was a mistake, being the summer of another page and place.

Nor did the interior of the chateau reassure. The frail old furniture was understandable, and the ormolu, the crystal candelabra hanging from a painted ceiling, and the tapestries —they gave the right suggestion, for a summer noon, of the serene continuity of pleasant human things. The ladies of the house looked down into the room from their frames of heavy gilt, which hung on the walls, and one of them, the portrait near me, of a girl of 1779, seemed as surprised as myself to observe soldiers below intent upon typewriters, and the coming and going of British officers.

One of the officers came to me. He knew my name, and met me as if I were one of that household, though I had never seen him before. "They telephoned from headquarters about you this morning. We were beginning to think you were lost. The battalion you want is somewhere near Neuve Chapelle, but you'd never find it. It's rather altered up there, since the attack, and it's an unattractive corner. But

we've got a guide for you—here he is, too. Lieutenant Jones . . ."

The lieutenant was boyish, and had the awkward candor of shyness. He smiled, and said, "I offered to take you before I knew where you wanted to go. Shall we start at once? It's fairly quiet there now, so we'd better get it over."

We had a brief run by car through an uninhabited country, and then, for no reason that I could see—but perhaps reason was not there—the officer hid the car by a hedge and said we must walk. We took a straight road through an avenue of poplar trees. There was a stagnant ditch on either side of it and limited views of level meadows. The hot sun was there, but if his light had been green, and so the land had had that sinister complexion of the spectral vistas we may see through colored glass, it could not have been more forbidding. It was an earth changed in nature. We were alone in it. There was enchantment here, and we had no clue. We approached a large pool of blood and separated to walk round it. Its extent alarmed me, but, except that my guide

must have seen it to have avoided it, he gave no other sign that he admitted its existence. It lay in front of an estaminet. The door of the inn was open, and beside the door was a chair; but nobody was in the chair; nobody sat in it contemplating that mystery in the middle of the road. The estaminet was deserted. There were houses and sunlight but no people.

The distance was thudding heavily. The horizon was loose, perhaps, and was bumping on the earth. Ahead of us, almost lost in a clump of trees, were the red roofs of secretive farm buildings. There were ragged gaps in the tiles. As we neared the farm there was a crash, as though a boiler plate had fallen from a great height onto paving stones and was at once inert. Two columns of black smoke, which had not been there before, stood over the farm. The road, which was scattered with holes, continued straight on with indifference, though a tree had been lifted by its roots athwart it. There was a row of trees that were bundles of white splinters, and beyond them we came upon the first men. Six were lying on the ground, and two other men were bent over

them. The faces of the men on the ground were averted and their eyes closed. They did not want to look at us or at anything else.

The ugly but intermittent sounds were not so distant as they had been when we reached another group of farm buildings, scattered among plantations near a road crossing. The trees about them were motionless in the sleeping afternoon, as though guarding a secret. The walls of one of the old barns, a structure so weathered that its rufous brickwork had the surface of dusty gray stone, were riven, and the edges of the new gaps were bright red. From somewhere not so far away there came a noise which might have been of an idle boy rattling a stick along a fence. An officer, to my surprise, came to a door of a barn which I had thought was empty. "Come in," he cried. "They spray that road with a machine gun. Can't you hear it?"

Under the rafters of that partially dismantled building was a man who laughed when he saw me, though we had not met for years. His amusement was caused, most likely, by my unexpected appearance, which he ac-

cepted as another absurd feature of the common phantasy. He himself, an Oriental scholar, in that place, as a soldier, was not easily believable; but I took him in as one of the irrelevances which are quite consistent anyhow in prolonged and vivid nightmares. It was the last place where one would have expected to see him, yet there he was; and he laughed again, as he came forward, because his quizzical temper thoroughly relished the waywardness of this resort and this coincidence. His blue eyes were merry.

"Have you gone mad, too?" he asked. "What brings you here?" He gossiped, presently, about our circumstances. "There's a war on up here, but who's making it, except ourselves, beats me. I think it is between us and the spooks. You haven't noticed any so-called Germans about, have you? I haven't seen one yet"—he flinched and grimaced at an explosion outside—"but that sort of thing all day long has to be accounted for."

We set off together for his own place, which he said was near, though long before we reached it—mainly through a serpenting

trench—my sense of direction became dizzy and was restricted merely to up and down. The earth was decrepitating in the heat; that was rifle fire. The deep drain meandered aimlessly, with yellow charlock and scarlet poppies vivid overhead against the blue sky. We climbed out to hurry across a road, and entered another drain, which traversed the foundations of extensive ruins, and there we waited, on our hands and knees, while the ruin ahead of us was smashed a little more. When the dust and smoke had settled a little we hurried along, and soon emerged into a village.

Nobody else was in it. It seemed proper to find it was deserted. It was acrid with damp mortar and smoldering fires. Some of the houses lay piled across the street. That village had come to its end, and the only proof that life had ever known it was a child's doll stretched out on its back in an attitude of abandoned grief near the mummied carcass of a cow. We went across the churchyard—just one vacant Gothic arch of the church was standing—and strode over gray rubble, splin-

tered coffin boards, and a few disinterred sleepers in nightgowns who had come to the surface again, indifferent as to how they slept. As we got through that square a spasmodic growling sped at us through the silence and burst in violence by the Gothic arch. We descended hurriedly a long flight of stone steps to a cellar. My friend Reynolds then sat on a soap box and laughed once more, a little too long. "This is my home," he said. "I share it with a surgeon. I think he'll lend you a bed for the night." Reynolds pointed to a stretcher in the corner.

The cellar was immense and gloomy, and our privacy was a corner of it, screened by some sacking from the battalion aid post, which was the remainder of the cellar. Just then we had the place to ourselves. Reynolds was eager for news; yet as I began to speak the cellar shook in a series of spasms, and a tin bowl on the floor trembled and whined. We waited, and soon the cellar became deep in the still earth again.

"We're all right here," Reynolds specu-

lated, "because if that stairway goes there's another way out. Perhaps I'd better show you where it is."

We had a look round, and saw the other stairway, a pile of bandages, and a wine-bin in which there was nothing but a cat which was glad to meet us. Then there was no more to do but to return to the kitchen table. That was loaded with documents, neatly piled under shell-noses. Reynolds took his tunic off, inspected the topmost documents, and filled his pipe.

"Now you've seen this place, perhaps you'd hardly believe the trouble I took to get from India to it," he said. "They said men were badly wanted, so I supposed I ought to be quick. The results surprised me. My patience had to mount a lot of monuments—it was patience which sat on a monument, wasn't it? —well, I was kept waiting a devil of a time on each one I came to. Authority is a funny old dear, and tried to keep me from the delights of this hole as long as possible. But one day I got as near to this as Marseilles, and I was de-

spondent because I thought all would be over before I could have some. . . . Orderly!"

"Sir!"

"Bring two drinks. I say, have you seen Major Weston today?"

"No, sir. He was killed last night, sir."

Reynolds rose and stared at me. Then he sat down again. "Bring the drinks, Richard," he said.

He sat, while waiting the return of the orderly, playing a tattoo on the table. Then he spoke to himself. "There it is," he said. He murmured across to me in doubt. "I tell you I *spoke* to him last night. I *spoke* to him." He looked at me as though I ought to confirm that a little conversation with another man might sometimes fail to render him invulnerable.

The orderly returned, methodical as at a London counter, and then silently vanished as though he had passed through a wall.

"Well, here we are," said Reynolds, in a subdued way. "I was telling you how I got here, in a hurry, to join in the war before it was over. They shunted me in trains and lor-

ries about France for weeks. I began to believe they had attached me to a battalion which didn't exist. Everybody knew promptly where it was, but it was never there, though sometimes it had been. I did find it at last, though, and reported myself. The adjutant said, 'But where's your sword? You can't parade without a sword.' So I went to a farm, and sent to London for a sword, and slept in an outhouse under some fowls while waiting for it. At length it came, and I reported myself again. 'You've got a sword,' said the adjutant. 'You cannot parade with a sword. The order is that all swords must be returned.'

"It is all like that," Reynolds assured me. "The only thing to do here is to shut off your intelligence and hope that the next thing to happen won't be as idiotic as everything which has happened before. I got into frightful difficulties at first through trying to be reasonable. One day some headquarters or another sent a stern demand to know why we were using so much chloride of lime. I suppose they thought we were stealing it. I don't know. Anyhow, a divisional headquarters has no

reason to use chloride of lime. So I told them what we did with it. That made matters worse. That made them suspicious. The colonel told me I'd better send an officer up to the latrines just to satisfy them with a report. The young officer was gone so long that when I remembered the chloride of lime again, because the report had to be made, I got nervous, and went to look for him. There had been a bit of shelling. I found him. He was in a crater. We had to waste some more chloride of lime."

Here Reynolds' narrative was interrupted. There was a shuffling on the stairs, and a whispering, "Take 'is legs." "I got 'im." A little group of soldiers moved across the cellar and laid one of their number on a bench. The others arranged themselves along the same form in various attitudes of lassitude and weary indifference. They were muddy, gaunt, and unshaven; all that was clean and bright about them was some bandages. Several attempted cigarettes with a slowness which allowed a match to burn out before it was used. They paid no attention to us and, after a steady glance at that array of cripples who seemed

resigned to anything that could happen, Reynolds called out to them that the medical officer was expected in at once. They did not answer. Some of them turned reproachful eyes on us, but they neither spoke nor moved. Other footsteps sounded on the stairs, hard and deliberate, and the M. O. and two assistants entered. Reynolds watched the scene for a while, called out that if help were wanted we could give a hand, and readjusted more privily the canvas screen.

"That goes on all day, off and on, if it's only a quiet day. When they're busy I clear out—I can't stand being looked at like that, when I can't do anything. We haven't had as many today. But I don't like the look of that fellow on his back. His feet are too loose. Sometimes the feet tell you more than a man's face."

There was groaning in the far corner, and Reynolds waited. He began his tattoo on the table. We sat, looking at the floor.

"No." (It was the voice of the M. O.) "No. Leave that man. You other fellows all right now? Better make your way to the transport while it's quiet. You'll do till you get to the

hospital. Lucky beggars. Hop it. Off you go."

The shuffling began again, and when that had ceased we heard the Medical Officer instructing his men where to put the soldier who remained. The doctor came over for a gossip with Reynolds before venturing out, and then once more we had the gloom to ourselves.

"Can you make anything of it?" asked Reynolds, with an inconsequence which was not altogether innocent.

"I find it a bit bewildering."

"There's no sense in it, none at all. Those fellows who have just gone out to hobble through shell-bursts in the hope of finding salvation—I wonder what they make of it? They never say a word about it. You might as well ask the horses—but some of the horses sweat through funk. It's very queer. Once a horse has had a dose of it, he trembles whenever he hears a gun. Trembles and sweats. But he goes into it when told, all of a lather, and so do we —all of a lather."

"It seemed to me when on my way here," I told him, "that the whole thing was just an illusion. The country didn't look real. Some-

times I wondered whether it was there, or whether I was there."

"I know. Most of the fellows feel that way. But don't be fooled by it. It's as real as stupidity. At first you think it's all rather an imbecile joke. That's why some of the best of the young uns die too soon. They go about showing it no respect, just as though the silly business was only pretending to be there. But there it is, all right. It is fatuous moonshine stuff, but it has got us in irons, and so you'll jolly well find. Here comes its Hermes—one of its envoys."

A despatch rider entered, saluted, handed over his token out of the blue, and went. Reynolds read the message, sighed, and placed it on one of the piles. "You get the notion, too, that you are lost in it, that nobody knows where you are, and could never find you. But the gods have got us taped. They know all about us, and if they told you to put your head in a bag you'd have to do it. You can get killed for two reasons—for being an idiot, and for refusing to be an idiot.

"One day, when we were just back in some particularly unpleasing rest billets—most of

our rest, by the way, was shelled to hell—the colonel came to me. 'Look here,' he said, 'the general has sent a message that a French colonel is to visit us on urgent business, though I don't know what he wants, and we are to treat him mighty fine. But there's no food fit to eat. He'll be here tonight. Just scout around for something tasty, will you? Luckily we can make him drunk, if he's that way inclined. And, I say, I wish you'd let him have your bed. His A. D. C. may have mine, as yours is the best.'

"We blessed those Frenchmen for nuisances, but we made ready for them, and our mess cook made a really presentable table of the stuff we had. Then we waited, wondering what these fellows were going to be like, for we'd seen nothing of the French, but had a huge respect for their military qualities. Most of us were only civilians turned soldiers. I think even our colonel had been a solicitor, in another life. Only the adjutant was a regular. So we were a bit nervous about it.

"At length he came, this French colonel—a tall portly man in a blue uniform and brown

bulging gaiters, accompanied by a slender young officer, very stiff and correct. The French colonel had one of those hunting horns round his shoulder—you know the sort of thing—you see the curly instrument in comic prints of French sportsmen out after partridges. He didn't take that trumpet off. Only his cap. His bald head was pale, but his big round face was red and very hearty, with lots of chin, and a long grizzled mustache which would have been straight and fierce if he hadn't laughed so much. He laughed, and stamped with one foot, or patted his sides with both hands, very free and friendly, and then pulled out his mustache. A cheery card. But his pale young A. D. C. was prim. Prim and silent. Never said a word. Smiled faintly and ironically when spoken to. 'Yes?' he would say. Only that. Seemed to think that it was all rather a bore.

"Not a word about the business of their visit. Only rich laughter about nothing in particular. We began dinner. The French colonel wore his hunting horn. We pretended not to see the thing—we sort of behaved as though a

hunting horn at dinner was the custom of the country, especially in war, and we didn't want our curiosity to betray our ignorance. The young French officer hardly looked up, and if he did it was to stare at the wall over the head of the man opposite. I suppose he found the crudities of a British table unentertaining, but that duty was duty.

"His colonel was different. He was enjoying himself—we happened to have a Burgundy of a good year—and our young fellows played up to him on behalf of the regiment and the good name of England. After one bout of merriment, which was so happy that we all joined in, that stout Frenchman rose, put one foot on his chair, and blew a tantara on the horn. Then he sat down again and went on.

"Of course we took no notice of the fanfare. Pretended we had heard nothing. The French colonel's A. D. C. paid no attention to it, either. We thought perhaps it might be the custom of the Frenchman's regiment, some ancient right won in battle. Now it was the proper thing for the colonel of that regiment

to do—to wind the horn at intervals during dinner. Maintain a link with the glorious past.

"That lusty colonel was full of funny stories, and at the end of a good one, when he'd got us all going, he'd rise from his chair and give a fanfare solemnly. I noticed our orderlies looked a bit surprised, but they didn't laugh. As for our own colonel, he was so polite that he appeared to have been as deaf to it as the young French officer.

"The fun got very lively after dinner, and I must say our youngsters thoroughly enjoyed this Gascon, who was certainly enjoying himself. He loudly approved our whiskey. Then, in a sentimental mood, he mentioned his wife. Ah! He would show why France would fight, but yes, till not a German was this side of the Rhine; that or death. He was very grave. Gentlemen, you shall regard this. Then he put his hand inside his tunic, and pulled out what might have been a pack of cards. But he tugged at the pack too hard. The cards shot across the table. I was a little shocked. Photographs of women. The scatter showed a collection of heads and busts, and not a few legs.

But the fine old fellow was entirely unembarrassed. The sort of thing which might happen to any man, you know. He began sorting them out, quite coolly and indifferently, and was evidently looking for a particular photograph.

"For the first time that evening the severe young Frenchman condescended to take an interest in what was going on. He rose and leaned over the table, and intently inspected the varied collection of ladies. His curiosity was genuine. Suddenly he pointed an accusatory finger at a portrait. He spoke at last. 'That is my wife,' he said to his colonel.

"Without a pause he struck his colonel in the face. The big fellow collided with a chair behind him, and over it went, and so did he, with a great banging of brassware on the stone floor of that farmhouse. Our colonel was horrified. We were all alarmed. We stared at one another. What happened when a French officer hit his colonel in the eye? What ought we to do when they were guests? Nothing in the King's Regulations about that.

"Somebody was assisting the French colonel

to his feet, but he rose lightly, shook with laughter as he pulled his tunic straight, and went through a door into the night. Outside, we heard him play a bold tantara on his horn, a salute to all stags, I suppose. Presently he came back.

"As he entered he was met by his junior. They embraced each other and kissed. I looked away at our colonel. I didn't know where to look. Our superior seemed to be bemused. He was, I thought, tottering on the verge of lunacy. He stood by the fireplace, looking at our guests, and fumbling at his mouth in wonder. We all acted, I must say, as though we had witnessed nothing unusual. Nothing had happened but what might have occurred in any well-regulated mess in war time. We were jolly well controlled, I think.

"A little later we conducted them to their rooms. But when they had gone none of us said a word about the evening's performance. We affected casually a pretense that we were now immune to surprises. Well, a subaltern did speak. He said to our colonel, 'Do you think he plays that trumpet at night, sir?' But

our colonel did not answer. We put the lights out.

"Next morning at breakfast we were very moody. The Frenchmen were late but nobody remarked it. I think we all were in doubt. Had anything happened the night before? After a bit our colonel called across the table to me, 'Look here, Reynolds. I am right, am I not? There were two Frenchmen with us last night?'

" 'Yes, sir. I think so. I had the impression myself, but as nobody else seemed to remember it I thought I might have been mistaken, and so kept quiet.'

" 'All right,' said the colonel. 'That settles it. I was wondering, myself, whether I'd been dreaming, but as you've got the same idea there may be something in it. If they were here last night, they're here now. You and I will go and greet them. Come along.'

"We went up to our colonel's room first. The bed had been slept in, but no French A. D. C. was there. So off we went to my room. And no French colonel, either. My bed had been used, but there was no other evidence, ex-

cept a hunting horn hanging over the knob at the head of the bed. 'Well, I'm damned!' said our colonel.

"Funny thing was, none of the orderlies had seen those fellows go. Nobody had seen them go. And we never heard another word about it. Never knew why they called. What do you make of that?"

I didn't attempt to make anything of it. As an episode of the world of war it was as meet and proper as an Oriental scholar making British reports on chloride of lime in the cellar of a French farm. While Reynolds and I sat smiling at each other, filling our pipes, the tin bowl on the floor began to complain again. It trembled and whined. The cellar began to be convulsive. Somebody fell headlong down the stairway.

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